

A Skirt for a Life?

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Julia was a beautiful, young Ugandan woman, straight and graceful as she walked along the dusty road, balancing a load of bananas on her head.

Her steps were light these days. She had recently met the man of her dreams. He was from a far off town called Hoima. He came from a different tribe than hers, but she felt she could live with that. And her mother would soon stop grumbling about it.

The only thing that saddened Julia was the distance between her new home and her mother's: It was a day's journey in the dry season. Still, she pressed forward to start a new life with her husband. He would earn plenty of money, Julia reasoned, and she hoped to have a big family. Perhaps she would not even have to wait too long for her first baby.

Shortly after her move to Hoima, brisk movements inside Julia's belly confirmed that she was pregnant. She would soon be wearing maternity clothes!

She contained her delight; in her culture, women do not speak openly about their pregnancy. It is simply another phase of life.

See related editorial on page 968.

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Where Have All the Mothers Gone? is a collection of stories of courage and hope during childbirth among the world's poorest women. To order, please e-mail savethemothers@cogeco.ca. All proceeds go to Save the Mothers (www.savethemothers.org).

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The only person she could seek advice from was her mother. She longed to stay in closer touch with her, but there was no telephone.

Still, the nine months of pregnancy raced by. Soon she would deliver.

However, in Julia's culture, a woman's life depends very much on the decisions her husband makes. Her husband—a man she thought loved her—told her not to waste his hard-earned money at a midwifery clinic. She was healthy, and should have the baby on her own.

She had no dress. She had no daughter. She had no grandchild.

Julia's husband was out of town the day her labor started. She sat alone in their one-room hut, in growing pain. By the time he returned home, her water had broken. She would need to deliver her child within 48 hours or risk infection, then death, a fate all too common in her country and across much of the developing world.

The man understood nothing about women's affairs such as child birth, so he went back to work with a promise to return that evening.

Julia labored on alone, growing more exhausted every hour.

After sunset, Julia's husband returned home. Seeing that she had not produced a baby yet, he reluc-

tantly promised to arrange a way for her to go to her mother's the following morning. He then went to sleep while Julia continued in labor through the night. During the night she clung to the certainty that her husband was a man of his word and would see to it that she got to her mother's village.

In the morning, her husband took her to the bus stop. But rather than traveling with her, he simply placed her on the morning bus. She dragged herself to her mother's alone.

Julia limped from the bus in agony into her mother's hut, beads of perspiration soaking her forehead. She fell into her mother's arms, sobbing, feeling each bolt of pain from the contractions.

Her mother knew the only hope now was for her daughter to get to a maternity hospital, a half day's journey by bus. Maybe the afternoon bus would have room for them. She needed two bus fares, but she had only a few shillings. Surely she had something to sell.

She placed her possessions in a big basket and made rounds of the village, tearfully telling her story to her neighbors. But what did she have to sell?

Finally, she brought out the precious, patterned dress she had cherished for many years. It would fetch enough for the bus fare.

She bundled up Julia, and they headed out on the road, two solitary figures, one losing strength with each step as they made their way to where the bus would stop. Somehow, they arrived, only to



find that the bus had moved on an hour earlier because it was full. No bus would come until the morning. They would wait by the roadside for it. Maybe someone would pass by during the night and help them.

The road was quiet as night fell and deepened. Julia's whimpers broke the silence. She was fading fast, as her pain dulled her thinking and fever set in. If she didn't receive help soon, she'd be dead.

Dawn brought fresh hope of reaching the hospital. The bus stopped by the roadside and loaded the passengers. But the signs were not good. Chills gripped Julia's body. A foul smell surrounded her. But her mother had not come all this way to give up. She persisted in her belief that soon everything would be fine.

The hours passed, and eventually the overloaded bus arrived at

the city terminal. The driver refused to make a detour to the hospital for the two women. Time was money, after all, and another load of customers was waiting.

Staggering from the bus with Julia in her arms, the mother prayed to God for mercy. She tapped on the windows of taxis, begging for a free lift. Her eyes told the story of a desperate mother's final struggle. One young man could not bear the sight any longer and offered to drive them to the hospital for free.

Julia's long, exhausting journey to motherhood was almost complete. From this point on, things began to happen as they should. The taxi pulled up to the hospital's front doors. Julia's mother ran ahead to call for help. Soon Julia was on a stretcher being wheeled inside, quietly, into the delivery

suite. A kind, capable physician and nurse came to her side.

Julia then took a long breath. It was her last, as she died that moment. The unborn baby was also dead and had been dead for a day already, after infection took hold in Julia's womb.

Four suns had set since the start of her journey, and she just could not hold out any longer. Her mother stood by, holding her lifeless hand, telling the story to the doctor. She had no dress. She had no daughter. She had no grandchild.

Julia's journey was finally over. Would anyone learn why it ended so tragically?

Somebody's mother died today. Or perhaps it was yesterday. I don't know. Did anyone notice?

—Dr. Jean Chamberlain Froese

